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The Nomads of Mongolia

Central Asia is allegedly the cradle of so much – Neanderthal Man, nomadic pastoralism, warfare itself, even UFO sightings – but it is all but useless as an explanatory concept in history. We do better with the notion of the steppe, but even this is an umbrella term embracing a wide variety of terrains, differing in vegetation, altitude and climate. Some writers rather crudely envisage the steppe as a continuum, stretching from Hungary to Manchuria, the core or heartland of what the geographer Halford Mackinder termed the 'world island' comprising Europe, Asia and Africa.[1] On this model a mountain range blocks off the steppe at either end. In Europe the Carpathians divide the Russian steppe from the Hungarian plain, while in east Asia the Khingan Mountains separate the Mongolian steppe from its Manchurian epigone. Others prefer a dualistic model, with the 'low steppe' comprising western Turkestan, the north Caspian and the south Russian plains, and the 'high steppe' consisting of eastern Turkestan and Outer and Inner Mongolia. As the names suggest, the high steppe covers the lands at an altitude between 4,500 and 15,000 feet while the low steppe terrain is at sea level.[2] Yet others prefer a triad, with the steppe arranged in three rows or layers. The first contains all the lands from Hungary to southern Ukraine, the north of the Black Sea and the gap between the Caspian Sea and the Ural Mountains. The second or 'central steppe' runs from northern Kazakhstan to south-central Asia, where it merges with desert regions. The third is the great steppe-land of Mongolia and northern Sinkiang, running along the northern fringes of the Gobi Desert to the Khingan Mountains in Manchuria. The entrance to this is through the Dzungar gap between the Altai and T'ien Shan Mountains.[3] Still other geographers are unhappy with the whole idea of the steppe as the central organising concept and speak instead of a distinction between 'Outer Eurasia' (Turkey, Iraq, Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, China and Japan) and 'Inner Eurasia' (Ukraine, Russia, Mongolia and the modern 'stans' (Kazakhstan, etc).[4] It should be stated also that even those who cleave to a 'horizontal' explanation of Asia sometimes opt for the desert or for river systems as the important physical feature of the continent, rather than the steppe. On this view, attention should be directed to the continuous belt of desert south of the steppe, embracing the Gobi and Taklamakan Deserts, the Kizil-Kum south-east of the Aral Sea, the Kara-Kum east of the Caspian and the Great Salt Desert of Iran. Significantly, at these latitudes the spread of continuous desert extends through the deserts of the Middle East and Arabia to the Sahara, and is halted only by the Atlantic itself.[5] Similarly, a horizontal view of Asian river systems would reveal continuity running across from the Yellow River and the Yangtse, via the Indus and Ganges and finally to the Tigris and Euphrates.

The emphasis on the steppe provides in Mongolia's case a 'horizontal' west–east model. Some, however, say that the key to Mongolia is the 'vertical' north–south axis running from the tundra of northern Siberia and the Arctic Ocean through the forest or taiga directly north of Mongolia past the steppe proper to the Gobi Desert, through the mountainous regions of northern China down to the fertile valleys of the south. Accordingly, some experts prefer to differentiate the 'steppe-forest' of northern Mongolia from the 'steppe-desert' of the south.[6] This view stresses the importance of mountains rather than steppe-lands: the Alashan, Beishan and Kunlun ranges, the Pamirs with peaks up to 25,000 feet and canyon-like valleys, the T'ien Shan or Mountains of Heaven (with peaks up to 24,000 feet), the Khenti of northern Mongolia, the Altai of Western Mongolia (with peaks up to 14,000 feet) and their westerly handmaiden the Tarbaghatai range.[7] The Altai Mountains have always particularly attracted writers about Mongolia, possibly because the Sayan–Altai plateau correlates with the forest-steppe. The largely pine-wooded taiga is important in Mongolian history, as it is drained by four mighty rivers:the Ob–Irtysh, Lena, Yenisey and Amur.[8] The sub-Alpine valleys of the Altai provide exceptionally good grazing grounds, with rich grass overriding the gravel, salt and loam of the soil. Although there is no magical dividing line between the taiga and the steppes – nothing as clear as the abrupt transition from the Ituri forest to the open savannah in the old Belgian Congo (modern Zaire) or the Amazonian jungle and llanos of Colombia – some travellers claimed to discern a kind of no-man's land of black earth dividing the two. Between the forest and the Gobi Desert lies the Mongolian steppe proper – some even define it as the area between the northern edge of the T'ien Shan and the southern edge of the Altai. Much of it is a treeless pasture, with many areas below sea level, but there are high hills, often forested, such as Mount Burqan Qaldun, sacred to the Mongols, in the north-central part of the region.[9] These hills would have been very important, providing as they did both rich grazing in summer and abundant hunting resources. Crucially important to Mongolia are its rivers, though many are impermanent and evanescent. Water was always the most precious resource for the inhabitants. There are many wadis, some springs, in the south-west some salt lakes and marshes, but it is no exaggeration to say that the area's great reservoir is Lake Baikal in the north, surrounded by high hills – and noted for its plethora of seabirds, especially gulls.[10]

Mongolia is essentially a plateau occupying approximately a million square miles, set at a much higher altitude than the steppes in Turkestan and the west, ranging from 3,500 to 5,000 feet. Its central and ineluctable feature is the Gobi Desert which comprises one-third of the area of Mongolia (with steppe and meadow about fifty per cent, and forest fifteen per cent). The Gobi is not a desert in the same sense that the Sahara is, as its surface can be grassy, sandy, pitted with scree or boulders or striated with salt marshes. Some purists object to the very term 'desert' on the ground that the Gobi is primarily a dry steppe.[11] On the outer fringes a transparent veil of grass is apparent, and grassland is widespread and abundant, but as one penetrates deep into the interior vegetation tends to be limited to scrub and grassy reeds. Thereafter one confronts a melange of moving dunes, stable dunes, clayey plains, salt flats, isolated wells and desert trees such as the white saxaul (which can be used for firewood) and the ephedra. The Gobi stretches west–east for twelve hundred miles.[12] The south–north journey from the modern Chinese border to the Russian frontier is about eight hundred miles long and takes about a month of solid camel-riding. For about half the time the trek is over undulating grassy plains. Then comes a four days' march of about fifty miles through deep, sandy desert, punctuated by two high ridges of rock, colourfully described by one traveller: 'Adrift in the hot expanses were small rounded hills riding like whales in silver mirages of water.'[13] This sandy desert breaks up the monotony of the undulating plain but slows down progress. It is followed by a further week of gravelly plains, with the soil a deep red colour, distinguished by brightly coloured translucent stones and crystals. Nomadic peoples found the Gobi an eerie, unsettling, spirit-ridden place and even later European travellers were disconcerted by the mirages: 'The prevailing colour was a kind of misty, half-transparent white, exactly like arrowroot or cornflour prepared with water only.'[14] The desert was uncannily quiet at night, when, as one writer mused, 'the bright, unwavering lights of the Great Bear, and the soft glimmer of Cassiopeia and the Pleiades stood out with a distinctness rarely seen in other latitudes.'[15] Clearly for the traveller across the Gobi the primary problem was water. In normal circumstances wells ten feet deep had to be dug every thirty miles or so; only with heavy rainstorms in summer was aridity mitigated.[16] Dust storms were another hazard but travellers failed to agree on their frequency and severity in the Gobi. Some claimed that there were choking sandstorms in summer and icy ones in winter, yet others, even with direct experience of the phenomenon, claimed it as a rarity.[17]

Mongolia suffers from both a harsh climate and lack of water. With a lack of adequate rainfall (on average only 10–20 inches annually), the land is too dry to support agriculture without expensive irrigation schemes, and this fact alone restricted the population of the land (estimates range from a low of 700,000 to a high of two million, and the contrast with the population density of neighbouring China was especially marked).[18] The northerly latitude and remoteness from the sea mean colder average temperatures, less sunlight and greater extremes of temperature than elsewhere in Asia. The winters are especially harsh, with temperatures below freezing for as much as six months in the year. Even within a single month the entire gamut of weather conditions can be experienced. One meteorological study done in June 1942 testified to the wild variations. A calm and sunny early evening was interrupted by a 60 m.p.h. gale, bringing dust, fog and ninety per cent cloud cover. This storm lasted an hour, blew itself out and was succeeded by a clear sky, with the night stars especially brilliant. Then between 1 and 2 a.m. there were heavy showers of rain, and by dawn the sky was again clouded over. By 9 o'clock the next morning there was fog, driving snow and a temperature of 33 degrees Fahrenheit.[19] Mongolia's great distance from the sea does, however, bring some compensations. Even though the country is in general very cold, there is little air humidity and hence relatively little snow, with falls rarely exceeding three feet in depth. With so little air humidity to produce clouds, Mongolia enjoys five hundred hours more sunshine in summer than Switzerland or the Midwestern states of the U.S.A. at the same altitude. When the break in this weather pattern occurs, it tends to be violent; the Franciscan envoy Friar Carpini who wrote about the Mongols in the 1240s reported severe thunderstorms and snowstorms in midsummer (his diary for 29 June 1246 records heavy snow that day), together with hurricane-strength winds, hailstorms and duststorms.[20] And the summer which could be so violently disturbed lasts just three months, from June to August. September is already very cold, and in October the first snowstorms can be expected. By November the rivers are frozen, and then comes the six-month Niflheim lasting until May. Throughout the year the weather is both extreme and unpredictable, with temperatures ranging from 100 degrees F in summer to –43 in winter. Since there are no natural barriers to the wind, gales are always violent. One can be hit simultaneously by winds from the Siberian tundra and desert storms from the Gobi.[21]

Not surprisingly, the steppes look very different at different times of the year. Probably the most glorious month is May, for then the plains are covered with an immense green carpet, pullulating with flowers, especially red poppies, gentians, geraniums, eyelets, delphiniums, asters, rhododendrons, edelweiss, white convolvulus and forget-me-nots, that last until late summer. There is a huge diversity of plants in Central Asia, including 8,094 species of flora, of which some 1,600 species are desert flowers.[22] Naturally, some regions of Mongolia are more favoured than others. Some geographers distinguish two climatic zones, one in the west as far as the Altai and T'ien Shan Mountains, and another in eastern Mongolia. In the western zone there is little summer rain but the winter is affected by Atlantic cyclones, with deeper snowfalls than in the east. In compensation the mountain ranges of western Mongolia and the many rivers, mountain streams and springs created alpine meadows and ideal conditions for winter pasture. In the eastern zone monsoons bring moisture in summer and a prevailing anticyclone, lowering over the steppes, in winter. The winters often see clear, sunny days and quiet windless weather, with very little snow, so that livestock can pasture all year round.[23]

The eastern part of Mongolia is thus especially favoured, and within this favoured area most privileged of all is the area around the Onon and Kerulen Rivers – exactly where Genghis Khan was born. The Onon, about 500 miles long, rises in the eastern slopes of the Khenti Mountains (the highest peak of which is over 9,000 feet high), the watershed between the Pacific and Arctic Ocean basins, and which perhaps contained the sacred mountain of Burqan Qaldun. The Onon is a tributary of the Shilka which in turn feeds the Amur. (If the combination Onon–Shilka–Amur is treated as one river, at around 2,744 miles in length it counts as the world's ninth longest river.)[24] The Kerulen, which rises on the south slopes of the Khenti Mountains, flows through the eastern Mongolian steppes, enters China and empties into Lake Hulun. In years of high rainfall the normally exitless Hulun may overflow at its northern shore and, after another twenty miles, flow into the Ergune River, the traditional border between Russia and China. Six hundred miles along the Ergune will again take one to the mighty Amur. (If, in contrast to the Onon–Shilka–Amur above, one computes the 'Amur' as the Kerulen–Ergune–Amur system and regards it as a continuous river, the resultant stream becomes the world's *sixth-longest* river, with a length of more than 3,000 miles.)[25] The Onon forest, four hundred square miles in extent, between the Rivers Onon and Kerulen, and in time the Mongols' heartland, is thus a kind of oasis in the midst of the steppes, and as such a sort of wonderland. Here can be found a plethora of trees unknown elsewhere in Mongolia: wild cherry, dogrose, currant, hawthorn, poplar, birch, elm, wild apple, Siberian apricot, willow, ash, buckthorn, Russian ash, juniper, walnut, acer, pistachio.[26]

The climate of Mongolia has always ruled out significant agriculture. The inadequate water supply, and the rapid disappearance of moisture because of evaporation and solar radiation are only the worst of the problems, to which should be added a short growing season, extensive swamps and marshes, cold and dry conditions and a salty, waterlogged or frozen soil. The people of Mongolia were (and are) mainly nomadic pastoralists. This simple phrase masks complexities, for there are pastoralists who are not nomadic and nomads who are not pastoralists. For example, the forest people of Siberia owned horses and were nomads, though not pastoral ones, while the gauchos and cowboys of the Americas were pastoralists but not nomads. Moreover, there is not even a necessary distinction between pastoralism and agriculture. Some peripheral peoples of Mongolia – the Ongud just to the north of the Great Wall of China and the tribes of the Yenisey – were partly pastoral and partly agricultural.[27] Even more nuances and fine distinctions can be introduced if we bring in the notion of transhumance and non-transhumance. The usual distinction is that transhumance involves journeys between winter and summer pastures but the pastoralists have a fixed abode, in a village, say. In nomadic pastoralism the drovers have no fixed abode, live in tents, and move with the animals from season to season.[28] Although animals were private property, pasture was held in common by extended kinship groups, where the strongest tribes and clans claimed the best pasturage at the optimum time of year. Water was always a paramount consideration on the steppe, so that different nomad groups exercised proprietary rights to the key wells, with the 'outsiders' having to pay for access.[29] Typically, winter camps and pastures would be in protected areas with reduced snow cover, in low-lying mountain valleys, river flood plains, the southern side of hills, or even depressions in the steppe. This was the grimmest time, with the animals very weak by spring. Once the drying of grass and the evaporation of water heralded the coming of spring, in late May or early June, the nomads moved to a higher altitude for the summer pasture and their animals rapidly gained weight. Moving swiftly out from winter camp, they made at once for large pools of melted snow to water the stock. The distances between winter and summer pasture could be as little as twenty miles, but were usually about fifty miles, up to a maximum of sixty in favoured locations such as the Onon–Kerulen valleys; for those having to eke out their existence on the fringes of the Gobi the journey might be seventy-five miles or even more. These journeys would be accomplished in leisurely tranches of between five and twenty miles a day, with the pace not pressed daily; rather, the nomads would travel on alternate days or have longer rest periods.[30]

The summer camps were pitched on high ground with cool breezes.

This was the season when yoghurt, cheese and the alcoholic drink koumiss, from fermented mares' milk, were produced. Wool from sheep and hair from goats and camels was used to make thread and thence rope, rugs, carpets and saddlebags. The Mongols were adept at making felt for tents. First they beat the wool, then poured boiling water on it and rolled it back and forth until the fibres locked to produce the fabric. Felt was a key aspect of the Mongol's tent, the ger (the more familiar word 'yurt' was a later Russian coinage), as it provided insulation and protection against high winds. Autumn was the time to breed sheep for a spring lambing but was otherwise a golden moment with the animals at their strongest.[31] When the cold weather began, the nomads started the trek back to winter quarters. They liked to graze the animals on the periphery of the winter pasture until the weather became too severe, only transferring them to the 'heartland' of the pasture when the temperature plummeted. The Mongols next made an educated estimate of how many animals would survive on the winter pasture and slaughtered the weakest and least hardy specimens. The meat would then be smoked as a winter food supply. The Mongols' diet was therefore also seasonal: dairy products in summer, meat in winter.[32] Naturally the nomads tried to retain as many live animals as possible, subject to the constraints of water and forage. Winter was always a worrying time, as its severity could never be accurately predicted; a small-scale drover could find his wealth wiped out overnight from a combination of frost, drought and disease. Since the animals were weak from the 'iron rations' of winter and spring was lambing time, seasonal regularity was crucial. If there were freak snowstorms in spring, much of the stock, especially the newborn young, would die; fortunately this did not happen on average more than once in a generation. The big battalions as always did best, as the herdowner with the most beasts would recover more quickly than one with a handful.[33]

The Mongolian pastoralist had a plethora of problems to solve and was never far from a knife-edge. Erosion – plant cover destroyed and dust storms blowing away the topsoil – and mineralisation due to the action of the wind and the workings of salt springs were serious problems. If these phenomena coincided with overgrazing, the result would be desert. In any case, salinity, alkaline soil and general aridity limited the amount of water and grass available. This meant that there could never be any real increase in herd numbers and, by the same token, in human numbers. This is another way of saying that pastoralism unaided is bound to produce a steady and constant population.[34] Moreover, even in such a steady state nomads had to make precise calculations about water supply and the distance between wells and waterholes, as the different animals they herded moved at different speeds and had different water needs.

In this context snow was a mixed blessing for the Mongols. On the one hand, it increased pasture resources, without which there would be overgrazing and, ultimately, desert. On the other hand, snow could be a deadly danger, as it covered up pasture grass and other plants, preventing livestock from grazing at all.[35] Particularly fearful was (and is) the phenomenon known as *zud*. This involved repeated and alternating thaws and freezes, creating thick, impenetrable sheets of ice under the snow. *Zud* was particularly feared since it could affect the whole of Mongolia, unlike drought, which never had such a universal impact.[36] The Mongol herdsmen had to balance all these climatic variables while maintaining five different types of domestic animal: sheep, goats, cattle, horses and camels – all with different needs and requiring different management techniques. Unlike the Bedouin of Arabia with the dromedary or the forest peoples of the taiga with their reindeer, the Mongols were not single-animal specialists. Their herding needed rotation of pastures just as much as agriculturalists needed rotation of crops.[37] Horses and cattle need wetter pasture than sheep and goats, so require streams and fertile land. In Mongolia this meant pasturing them separately from the other stock. Sheep and goats notoriously crop grass very closely, which means that larger livestock cannot graze the same land immediately after them. Overgrazing by sheep and goats was particularly serious, as their hooves cut the surface of the ground and exposed the soil, leading to wind erosion.[38] Proper husbandry of pasture meant that the grazing lands had at times to be rested altogether and then grazed by different stock – cattle and horses – to give it a rest from the remorseless sheep and goats. It was axiomatic that no pasture should ever be grazed by the same stock year in and year out. The technical reason, apart from erosion, is that a steady accumulation of dung and urine from the same kind of animal after a time ceases to have a fertilisng effect and instead becomes poisonous, not only providing less nourishment but also enhancing the danger of disease and epidemics.[39] All this meant either that special feeding grounds had to be set apart for cattle and horses, or that they had to be pastured before and ahead of sheep and goats.

A closer look at the five domestic animal types can help to point up the complex problems the herdsmen and drovers faced. There was a problem right at the heart of Mongol culture, what one might term a difference between the objective and the subjective. Objectively, the most economically valuable asset they possessed were their massive flocks of sheep, but subjectively it was the horse that was most prized. In their value system the Mongols rated their stock in descending order of importance as follows: horses, camels, cattle, sheep and goats.[40] Yet 50–60% of the animals they raised were sheep, which were the mainstay of their primitive economy. Since early twentieth-century Mongolia scarcely differed from its thirteenth-century counterpart, we can put flesh on the bones, as it were, by adducing some statistics. In 1918 Mongolia had a grazing area of some 300 million acres, supporting 1,150,000 horses, 1,080,000 cattle, 7,200,000 sheep and 230,000 camels. For 1924 the figures were 1,350,000 horses, 1,500,000 cattle, 10,650,000 sheep and goats and 275,000 camels. By 1935 these numbers were, respectively, 1,800,000, 2,350,000, 17,700,000 and 560,000.[41] Although there was a rapid increase in overall numbers because of special economic plans in the twentieth century, the basic ratios held good: and the centrality of sheep is obvious.

The Mongolian sheep is small, producing less meat than its European counterpart. Its wool was of little commercial value but was used to make felt and clothing. The most important sheep product was milk, used to make either butter and cheese or koumiss.[42] The sheep proved its value during the spring move from winter to summer pasture as it did not have to be watered, instead deriving the moisture it needed from dew and the grass wet from melted snowfalls. Spring was of course a risky time – both lambing and shearing took place before the move to mountain pastures. The pastoralist always had to be careful. Sheep numbers could decline alarmingly whenever pasture was poor – as it was at high altitudes, in deserts and on the margin of forests.[43] Most of the surplus animals slaughtered at the beginning of the winter season were sheep, but it seems that the Mongols were frugal in their consumption of mutton and lamb. The Franciscan Carpini reported that a single sheep could feed fifty men.[44] The traveller Simon of St Quentin, in the course of a tirade on poor Mongol table manners, remarked: 'They eat so little meat that other peoples could scarcely live from it.'[45] An average family travelling in convoy with the seasonal migration would typically possess one hundred sheep, just a handful of oxen, five horses that could be used to ride into battle and three other ponies; it was conventional wisdom that the optimum size of an ovine herd was around one thousand. Sheep were herded together with goats, another important nomad resource, both for milk and wool. Their advantage was that they could survive on pasture other than grass, but their demerit was that they destroyed small bulbs as well as the trees the Mongols counted on for firewood or building materials.[46] Pigs were entirely absent from the nomad animal inventory, though not because of any religious taboo; the Mongols were happy to eat pork or 'black cattle.' The reason was simple. Pigs were not bred because they needed acorns, unavailable on the steppe, and because they could not migrate long distances.[47]

About nine per cent of the Mongols' livestock was cattle. The typical long-horned Mongolian cattle were used mainly as beasts of burden, drawing the carts on which the Mongols carried their mobile gers, though sometimes also for meat or hides; they were rarely used as herd animals. The ox was the most typical bovine among the Mongols; they saw the advantage of allowing bulls to develop their full musculature before castrating them. Possibly the most prized of all Mongolian cattle was the yak. It used to be thought that the yak was used only in high mountain regions, but this view seems to have been discarded. Weighing up to 2,200 pounds and standing 5–7 feet at the shoulder, the yak was prized both as a beast of burden and for its milk, meat and fibre; its dung was also thought to make the best fuel.[48] The well-known writer Vikram Seth has described the yak as a veritable machine for converting grass into butter, fuel, tent hide and clothing.[49] The most versatile variety is the *hainag* , a cross between a bull yak and a cow; this hybrid is particularly valuable as it can operate at both high and low altitudes, is docile and yields better milk. The Franciscan Rubruck and Marco Polo were also enthusiasts for the yak. This is Rubruck:

> [They have] extremely strong cattle, with tails which are abundantly hairy like a horse's and with shaggy bellies and backs: they are shorter

> in the leg than other cattle, but stronger by far. They haul along the large dwellings of the Mo'als [Mongols], and have long, slender, twisted horns which are extremely sharp so that the points constantly require to be sawn off. The cow will not let itself be milked unless one sings to her. They have a bull's temper, moreover, in that if they see a person dressed in red they charge at him with a desire to kill him.[50]

However, yaks and cattle in general could not compare in utility with the camel, the Mongols' second most prized animal. The camel came close to the definition of an all-purpose beast, as it could work in almost all conditions and travel on any surface but was particularly valuable in areas where the Mongols' beloved horse would struggle, as in the Gobi, Ordos, Alashan and Taklamakan Deserts. Camels have always had a bad press, particularly from the Victorian explorers and adventurers like Sir Richard Burton and Fred Burnaby, who remarked scathingly that a camel galloped like a pig with its forelegs and a cow with its hind legs.[51] Yet those who know them well say that they are affectionate and drawn to humans; like dogs and horses, they instinctively ensured their survival by attaching themselves to Man, the protector against predators.[52] The Central Asian camel is the two-humped variety or Bactrian. Naturally, among the Mongols, a horse-loving people, it did not have the kudos or importance the dromedary possessed for the Bedouin, even though Mongolia was probably its aboriginal homeland, but it was better-tempered than its one-humped counterpart. Since in Central Asia it co-existed with the wheel, it could not aspire to the position of indispensable 'ship of the desert', but against this is the fact that the only study of the camel in literature is Mongolian.[53] The role of the Bactrian in Asian history is indisputable. In medieval times it was common in Anatolia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Mongolia and China and made the Silk Road possible.[54]

The Bactrian's advantages were manifold. It has a lifespan of 20–40 years. It can carry loads of between 320 and 370 pounds. It can go thirty days without water if there is decent grazing and can drink water with a higher salt content than seawater, though when water is available it will gulp down up to fifty-seven litres in one go. It is also a good swimmer. Its milk could be turned into camel *koumiss* and its hair was used as a staple in Mongol textiles. The Bactrian can travel at 4 m.p.h. unladen and 2½–3½ m.p.h. laden and can carry its 300-pound-plus load for thirty miles a day.[55] Yet it had several drawbacks as a would-be 'wonder animal'. It is a diurnal animal, and on military campaigns it was sometimes urgently necessary to travel at night. Bactrians tend to stray while grazing, which makes them much more labour-intensive than sheep or goats. They need eight hours grazing time each day. They hate to be left alone in the desert and, if they find themselves in such a predicament, are likely to trek on until they drop dead. If they slip on ice in winter, that spells death, for they cannot get up again. Even the very useful dung or 'chips' used as fuel produced a dense, pungent smoke, making their Mongol drivers bleary-eyed as they sat around the camp fire.[56]

The animal that allowed the Mongols ultimately to conquer the steppes was the horse, that indispensable adjunct of those centaurs of the plains; as has been well said, a Mongol without a horse is like a bird without a wing. The steppe horse as a species was similar to the wild or Przewalski's horse.[57] Horses were domesticated on the steppe as early as 3,200 BC, but early civilisations used them for chariot warfare rather than as cavalry. Probably first tamed as a ridden warhorse by the Mongol tribes between the fifth and third centuries BC (but on the western steppes not until the first century BC, by the Scythians), the horse became an even more formidable weapon of war with the invention of the stirrup in the fifth century AD.[58] Around 12–14 hands high, coarse, with a large head, straight neck, heavy coat, thick legs, heavy-boned, shorter, stockier and sturdier than the destriers of medieval Western Europe, the Mongol horse was an animal of incredible stamina, capable of galloping six miles without a break. Although in the West its height would classify the animal as a pony rather than a horse, zoologists concur in granting the Mongol steed the status of a true horse. It can survive in temperatures ranging from 30 degrees C in summer to –40 C in winter. Mongolian horses find a walk too slow for their short legs and a canter too exhausting, so their natural pace is a fast trot.[59] Their gait is ungainly and they provide an uncomfortable ride for the uninitiated. Their supreme talent is being able to use their hooves to scrape away snow from the steppe surface to reach grass or lichen below and to survive on leaves from trees; they do not need to be fed beans, grain or other fodder. In common with many other Asian equine breeds they can subsist wholly on grazing, unlike 'proper' horses which would quickly weaken if left outside in all weathers and given no supplementary feeding. It was this all-weather capability that so often allowed the Mongols to defeat their enemies, since they could campaign in winter.[60] When campaigning, each Mongol had three remounts and on forced marches rotated these every two hours to prevent exhaustion. Coupled with mobility – the Mongols could ride 600 miles in nine days, though obviously not on the same horse – this made the armed nomads almost unbeatable. Yet even the magnificently tough Mongol horse was vulnerable to freak weather. The real fear for the pastoralists was that a late blizzard in spring with thick snowfall would hit their horses at their weakest after months of semi-starvation.[61] Barring such acts of God, the Mongols could be confident that their horses would serve them well in every context. Such was the importance of the horse that the Mongols operated a kind of informal utilitarian calculus to estimate wealth and the value of their herds vis-à-vis other stock. They reckoned that each person needed five horses to live well, which meant that a family of five would need twenty-five riding horses and four to six pack horses. A ger containing five people that had more than ten horses was considered rich. A horse was valued as being equal to five head of cattle or six sheep or goats. A two-year-old counted as half a horse and a yearling as one-quarter.[62] The Mongols used mainly mares, as these were more docile and yielded the vital milk for making koumiss. If short of food, they had a technique for making an incision in the animal's vein, drinking the blood, and then sealing up the wound. The very strongest horses were kept as breeding stallions and each of these had 50–60 mares in his harem. The stallion, though troublesome, was very useful to a man on night watch, as he would not let his mares escape and was as alert in this regard as a herdsman against wolves.[63]

Men, women and children were all expected to be expert with horses. Children were mounted on horses at the age of 3 and strapped in even earlier so that they could get used to the motion of their mount; there are examples of infant horsemen who could ride before they could walk.[64] Mongols trained their horses to respond to calls and whistles, like dogs, to obviate the need for any special corps of wranglers. They broke their mounts early to inculcate obedience but did not push them to the limit until they were five-year-olds; one of the reasons for the early breaking was to train the horses not to kick or bite.[65] After breaking, the next stage was accustoming the animals to saddles and tack. Mongolian horses' tack comprised a simple bridle and a short-tread, deep-seated saddle with short stirrups. These saddles had a very thick felt pad; the bridle was an ordinary jointed ring snaffle. The noseband was linked to the cheek pieces, so that when the reins were pulled, the horse felt pressure over the nose as well as via the mouth, lips and tongue.[66] Mongols did not groom their horses but let the mane and tail grow so long that it almost trailed on the ground. They claimed that this kept the horses warm in winter and warded off flies in summer; moreover, if a bridle or stirrup broke, there was always a ready supply of horse-hair with which to do the mending.[67] Training then started with the horse at a standstill to get the animal used to noise, particularly the simulated din of battle. Next they set the steed in motion while shooting arrows from the saddle, so that it could get used to the different movements as the rider drew arrows from his quiver, moved the drawn bow from one flank to the other and shot from different angles. The horse had to learn to keep straight while receiving leg signals only, as the reins were not held but knotted. The rider had to keep the legs rigid so as not to confuse the horse; turning in the saddle was done with waist and hips. Other techniques involved getting the charger used to ropes and lassos being thrown, lances hurled and swords wielded, sometimes very close to the animal's head.[68] Strangely, the Mongols found that accurate shooting was easier at the gallop than at a canter; this was because when galloping on a free rein the horse lowered its whole topline, stretching and lowering its head and neck, giving the archer a free field of fire. To ensure that their horses could veer and turn rapidly the Mongols first turned them in a large circle, then gradually narrowed the range in ever diminishing circles until rapid turns became second nature. Marco Polo in the late twelfth century noted that Mongol horses were so well trained that they could turn as quickly as a dog.[69]

Then came the training in verbal commands. Noting the peculiarities of different kinds of horses, the Mongols preferred to use geldings if they were setting an ambush, as they did not neigh as much as stallions and mares.[70] The Mongols were fond of their horses, and those that survived the arduous campaigns were allowed to retire and graze into their dotage; only in extreme circumstances would they be killed for food. Since the horse was a precious resource, the Mongols were very solicitous for their welfare. They did not ride them in spring or summer but turned them out to grass, allowing complete rest and relaxation. When taken away from the grass, they were tethered around tents and their grazing rationed until all fat fell away and they were ready to go on campaign.[71] Always after riding their mounts, the Mongols unsaddled them and then held their heads up high to prevent their eating until their breathing was normal and they were cold; this controlled the eating process and prevented colic and laminitis.[72] Generally they left their horses unshod, since the hooves of animals raised in a dry climate like Mongolia were harder and resisted abrasions better than horses raised in a wet climate; but once they ventured outside Mongolia, the Mongols often found that their steeds needed to be shod.

The nomads' herds were of course not the only animal life in Mongolia. It has always been a paradise for wildlife, and in the thirteenth century not even the massive Mongol hunts put a dent in their numbers. Even today Central Asia as a whole contains over eight hundred species of vertebrates.[73] Most of these animal species are represented in Mongolia, and in the thirteenth century there were even more. Some of these were in competition with the Mongols' herds, and in two different ways. The nomads' livestock displaced many wild ungulates – red deer, fallow deer, gazelle, antelope, wild goats, the Siberian ibex, the wild boar – and it was notable that as soon as the Mongols drove their herds from winter pasture, the gazelle and antelope would congregate in thousands to graze there.[74] Naturally, as nomadic pastoralists, it was the carnivorous predators the Mongols most targeted, especially wolves, which they controlled with their own breed of ferocious dogs and specially trained eagles. There were also bears, leopards, lynxes and cheetahs to contend with. And when the Mongols later expanded into other parts of central Asia, they encountered still more big cats. In those days the Asian lion was plentiful and, like their imperial predecessors the Romans, the Mongols were fascinated by the inaptly named king of beasts, to the point where they sometimes accepted lions as part of a total package of tribute from conquered nations.[75] In the Mongol era, too, the even more formidable tiger was plentiful in Asia, especially along the River Oxus.[76] Yet the Mongols' most interesting feline relationship was with the snow leopard or ounce. Nowadays only found at altitudes between 11,000 and 22,000 feet, in the thirteenth century they were plentiful, could be tamed, and were used by the Mongols in their great dragnet hunts, sometimes amazingly being conveyed to the killing ground on horseback. They made very convenient pets for the Mongols, as they will eat large amounts of vegetation, grass and twigs as well as meat.[77]

There was also a plethora of small game that swam into the nomads' ken: wild camels, foxes, rabbits, squirrels, badgers, martens, wild cats, hares, the extremely fleet-of-foot onager or wild ass, and the Mongolian rat, described by one traveller as 'a soft, pretty little animal, with a feathery tail and . . . none of the disgusting attributes of the common Norwegian or English rat.'[78] Of the many rodents, including mice, gerbils, hamsters and lemmings, the Mongols had a special fascination for the marmot, which they ate as a rare delicacy. Extremely hard to hunt and catch, marmots taxed the ingenuity of nomadic hunters but, apart from their role in the pastoralists' diet, they were valued because of a peculiar superstition – though not so very different from that entertained in the contemporary U.S.A. about the groundhog (often classified in the marmot family) – that one could tell from examining marmots what the weather and the seasons would be like.[79]

The Mongols often came upon snakes, particularly the Mongolian viper but, though venomous, its bite is rarely fatal to humans. It was a different story when the Mongols later expanded in imperial form, for then truly dangerous serpents like cobras were encountered, especially in Iran and the Aral–Caspian basin. However, the Mongols always seemed to have an ambivalent relationship with snakes. Although they would kill vipers and 'milk' them for their venom – which they used to tip poisoned arrows – in general they had a superstitious regard for what the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder called 'this detestable creature', on the grounds that they were related to dragons and had power over water.[80] In general it can safely be said that the more new frontiers the Mongols explored, the more exotic or previously unknown creatures they discovered, whether the striped hyena of Afghanistan, the seals of the Caspian, the ostrich of western Asia or the venomous spiders of Turkestan.[81]

The one surprising thing is that, their falcons and hunting eagles apart, they showed no interest whatever in Mongolia's teeming bird life. Although travellers' tales are full of descriptions of avian predators such as wild eagles, vultures, hawks, owls – as well as the innocuous partridges, grouse, swans, geese, cranes, spoonbills, egrets, pelicans and storks[82] – Mongol sources are silent. The same applies to Mongolia's seventy-six varieties of fish, which include trout, grayling, perch, roach, pike, sturgeon and the huge freshwater salmon or *taimen* – though here one can cite a deep cultural prejudice against fishing, which persists to this day. The consequence was that Mongolia's lakes were undisturbed by Mongol incursions into their fauna, and a great body of water like Lake Baikal could glisten undisturbed like a sea of sapphire picked out with white waves and snow-capped mountains round the coast.

The physical appearance of the Mongols always intrigued, and often shocked, Europeans and western Asians who met them. A Franciscan monk who accompanied Friar Carpini on his famous journey to the Mongol court in the mid-1240s described them as usually short of stature and slim, which he attributed both to their strenuous lifestyle and their diet of mare's milk. He described them as broad of face with prominent cheekbones and pointed up a hairstyle which seemed to be a melange of the Christian and the Saracen: on the one hand they had a tonsure on their heads like the Franciscans and other friars, and from this they shaved a strip three fingers wide from ear to ear; on the other hand, on their forehead they wore their hair in a crescent-shaped fringe reaching to the eyebrows and then gathered up the remaining hair and braided it like the Muslims.[83] A later Christian visitor, William of Rubruck, said that Mongol men had long hair behind the head, which they braided up in two plaits right up to the ears. While agreeing with Carpini that Mongol males tended to be short and slim, he found the women usually very fat. Females shaved their heads from the middle towards the forehead and had a particular fetish about noses. The smaller the nose, the more beautiful the woman was considered, to the point where they would even amputate the bridge of the nose, making the nose itself almost disappear.[84] Both these accounts were confirmed in a famous description by Carpini himself (he referred to the Mongols as 'Tartars'):

> In appearance the Tartars are quite different from other men, for they are broader than other people between the eyes and across the cheekbones. Their cheeks are also rather prominent above their jaws; they have a flat and small nose, their eyes are little and their eyelids raised up to the eyebrows. For the most part, but with a few exceptions, they are slender about the waist; almost all are of medium height . . . On the top of the head they have a tonsure like clerics, and as a general rule all shaved from one ear to the other to the breadth of three fingers, and this shaving joins on to the aforesaid tonsure. Above the forehead also they all likewise shave to two fingers' breadth, but the hair between this shaving and the tonsure they allow to grow until it reaches their eyebrows, and, cutting more from each side of the forehead than in the middle, they make the hair in the middle long; the rest of it they allow to grow like women, and they make it into two braids which they bind, one behind each ear.[85]

Such descriptions from the Franciscans were calm and dispassionate, possibly because bitter experience had not soured them on the Mongols. Western Asian descriptions of the Mongols' appearance were vitiated by the perception of them as the scourge of God, so inevitably they were described in Persian and Arab sources as hideous or frightful to look at. Emphasis was placed on the lack of facial hair, the quick, glancing eyes, the shrill and piercing voices, the hardy bodies. Two witnesses may suffice. Here is a Christian Armenian of the thirteenth century:

> They were terrible to look at and indescribable, with large heads like a buffalo's, narrow eyes like a fledgling's, a snub nose like a cat, projecting snouts like a dog's , narrow loins like an ant's, short legs like a hog's, and by nature no beards at all. With a lion's strength, they have voices more shrill than an eagle's.[86]

And this is a Persian poet:

> Their eyes were so narrow and piercing that they might have bored a hole in a brazen vessel, and their stench was more horrible than their colour. Their heads were set on their bodies as if they had no necks, and their cheeks resembled leather bottles full of wrinkles and knots. Their noses extended from cheekbone to cheekbone. Their nostrils resembled rotting graves, and from them the hair descended as far as the lips. Their moustaches were of extravagant length, but the beards

about their chins were very scanty. Their chests, in colour half white, half black, were covered with lice which looked like sesame growing on a bad soil. Their bodies indeed were covered with these insects, and their skins were as rough-grained as shagreen leather, fit only to be converted into shoes.[87]

Mongol women were a particular source of fascination to foreign observers. The accounts given of them ranged from arm's-length distaste – they were fat, they were ugly, they were indistinguishable from men – to grudging admiration – they endured great hardship uncomplainingly, they could ride horses as well as the men, they were expert drivers of carts, talented archers, and so on. Particular dislike was evinced for the garish colours in which they painted themselves, and particular admiration for the way they could give birth standing up and then carry on with their work as if nothing had happened. It was noted also that the Mongols respected women, as they were connected with the moon, and the moon was of great importance in Mongol religion.[88] Despite the complaints that the women were unisex, androgynous or epicene, the European chroniclers in effect contradicted themselves by drawing attention to the differential clothing of males and females. In the days before Genghis Khan and the luxury associated with world empire, the Mongols relied on clothes they could make from fur, leather, wool, felt and camel's hair. The standard garb was an ankle-length robe with loose trousers worn underneath. To combat the elements they had felt capes, fur hoods, leather boots and felt buskins; the fur clothes were double-layered so that the fur was on the inside as well as out.[89] Their favourite pelts came from foxes, lynxes and wolves. Although there were no great extremes of wealth and poverty on the steppes, there was inequality deriving from the different size of privately owned herds, and the most obvious sign of affluent status was the peculiar headdress worn by richer women known as the *boghtaq*. Described by one observer as a man's foot worn on a woman's head, the *boghtaq* was an iron wire frame between two and three feet tall, lined with bark and then adorned with red and blue brocade or pearls; sometimes the frames themselves were interwoven with red silk and gold brocade.[90]

This slightly meretricious aspect of the otherwise grim and stoical Mongol woman can perhaps be read as 'compensation' for the sparseness of her 'home'. Before the time of Genghis all Mongol tents were erected and dismantled at short notice. The domelike tent or ger was made from a latticework of willow lashed together with rawhide and covered with one or two layers of greased felt. The ger was thus a kind of hoop of interlaced branches and supports, converging at the top around a smaller hoop, from which projected a neck like a chimney. The outer layer was usually covered with white felt or a white mixture made from powdered bone, up to fourteen feet in diameter. The floor was covered with rugs of felt and hooks were fastened to the lattice work on which food, weapons and other items could be hung. The head of the household always faced the entrance which in turn always faced south; the men sat on the western side and the women on the east.[91]

Food and drink among the Mongols before the rise of Genghis Khan was largely a function of the narrow pastoral economy, that is to say, it was heavily dependent on milk and meat. In the summer, when mare's milk was plentiful, the Mongols actually preferred it to meat, but in winter this milk became a luxury item, available only to the more affluent. Only in an emergency was meat eaten raw; it was usually boiled or roasted. The staple diet in winter for the ordinary man and woman was a gruel made from multiply-boiled millet. Such was the knife-edge on which the Mongols subsisted in winter time that the nomads were not allowed to feed bones to their dogs unless the marrow had been extracted first.[92] Everyone ate with their fingers from a common pot, and there was careful sharing of the food. Yet all observers agreed that on the steppes one had to be a dietary opportunist, to be omnivorous and to devour anything that came one's way. The Mongols would eat any kind of flesh, including marmots (as we have seen), mice and other small animals. Some observers claimed that they would ingest any sort of protein except the taboo flesh of the she-mule: cats, dogs, rats, even lice and the afterbirth of mares. The English monk Matthew Paris, who was obsessed with the Mongols, claimed that they would eat frogs and snakes. The only general taboo was that one could never eat an animal that had been struck by lightning.[93] It was also alleged that the Mongols ate human flesh. Although there is only one authenticated case of cannibalism (during Tolui's campaign in China in 1231, in a dire emergency), the canard persisted in Western Europe that this was a commomplace practice in Mongolia. According to this version of events, the Mongols cannibalised for pleasure or to terrify their enemies. The most outlandish allegation, popular in the West, was that the nomads used the burnt bodies of their elderly and useless fathers as a kind of sauce to sprinkle over their food.[94]

On the Mongol fondness for alcoholic drink there was unanimity of opinion. Koumiss was a staple of nomadic life. This was churned in a large leather bag hung at the threshold of the ger during the three to five months of the summer when mare's milk was available; it could be made from the milk of sheep and goats but this produced an inferior brew. In the winter the Mongols also made a light wine from rice, wheat, millet and honey. Turbid and cloudy, koumiss had a sting on the tongue like sour wine but a very pleasant aftertaste like almonds.[95] There was also a superior clear mare's milk, known as 'black' koumiss, produced solely for khans, chieftains and high-ranking oligarchs. But since the alcohol content of koumiss was only 3.25 per cent at most, the nomads got used to drinking huge quantities of it. In the innocent days of koumiss alone, alcoholism was rare and hence fights also. Alcohol became a serious problem later when the Mongols became exposed to real wine, three or four times as powerful, but not even Genghis Khan could do much about it, as heavy drinking was so completely ingrained in Mongol culture.[96] Drunkenness was regarded as something to be proud of, an honourable estate and the ultimate expression of machismo. Sated on their brew the first time round, the topers liked to throw up and then settle in for a fresh alcoholic binge. Yet it was not the vomiting that disgusted foreign observers so much as the general filth and lack of hygiene among the Mongols – largely a result of the superstitious reverence with which they regarded water. William of Rubruck reported that a Mongol would stop in mid-conversation and urinate or, if defecation was called for, would simply move away, squat, shit and continue talking.[97]

The harshness of the Mongolian habitat and the complexities of nomadic pastoralism help to explain the many potentialities of Mongol society eventually actualised by Genghis Khan. Care of massive and variegated herds and flocks produced a number of consequences: adaptability and ingenuity of response and initiative; mobility and the capacity for rapid mobilisation; military virtuosity; low levels of wealth

and of economic inequality; almost total absence of a division of labour; political instability. Migration meant constant alertness and readiness to fight, since wealth in livestock is almost by definition highly vulnerable to raiding, reiving and rustling. Managing large animals was inherently more strenuous and dangerous than tending crops, so the very nature of pastoral life produced a hardier breed than would be generated by the peasantry. Migration in peacetime also produced martial qualities via the surplus energy available for fighting, since in a pacific context warriors could leave the minutiae of herding and droving to women and children.[98] When the fighting came, it was less destructive than for sedentary societies that had to defend fields of crops, cities, temples and other fixed points.

There were other military 'spin-offs' from pastoralism. Moving huge herds of animals generated logistical skills and the capacity to navigate through uncertain terrain, coordinating with far-flung comrades while doing so.[99] The role of hunting was also very important. The Mongols began their hunting career with wolves and small animals, ruthlessly tracking down the former, and trading furs from the latter for clothes and other items. But they soon evolved into hunters of big game, and their gigantic battues (to be described in detail later) were an important form of military training.

Some scholars argue that, whereas a desert habitat is conducive to gradualism, the steppe habitat lends itself to rapid and violent solutions. Nomadic pastoralism on the steppe tends to isolate people and breed mutual incomprehension, so that raiding becomes an intrinsic part of life. Since raiding is a diversion from the primary purpose of pastoralism, there is an innate tendency for pastoralists to make their raids so savage and ferocious that sedentary agriculturalists, having once tasted the lash, will ever afterwards give in without a fight. One might simplify by saying that pastoral life engenders a kind of bully's charter.[100]

On the steppe, inequalities of wealth and rank were nothing like so great as in settled societies. In the Mongol world there was no agricultural land, no disarmed peasantry attached to the land, no lords defined by landholding, no castles, forts or defensive bulwarks, no stores of food or wealth (except for livestock). Possession of wealth and control of territory was therefore very volatile, and it was impossible for a strong sense of property in land (and still less money) to develop. One consequence was the lack of specialisation or division of labour in Mongol society; in particular, a distinction between herdsman and soldier did not exist, for every male Mongol was both. And since both sexes tended flocks and drove wagons, the division of labour by gender was minimal. It is true that the men usually took charge of horses and camels, while women looked after cattle, sheep and goats, but Carpini's attempt to insinuate a division of labour by alleging that men were bone idle outside warfare while women did all the hard work in camp is refuted by better evidence, including that from his Franciscan successor at the Mongol court, William of Rubruck.[102] Rubruck's take was that both sexes were highly industrious but that they divided up chores according to rational preferences. Men made bows and arrows, stirrups, bits, saddles, built dwellings and carts, looked after the horses, milked the mares and churned their milk, tended and loaded the camels. Women made clothes, drove carts, loaded tents and gers onto them, milked cows, made butter and cheese, sewed skins, shoes, socks and clothes.[103] Carpini was misled because the Mongols disdained *regular* work, day after day, of the peasant kind. Idle sybarites such as Carpini describes would not have had their well-attested powers of endurance and ability to survive famines, nor would they have been tolerated in a culture where the leaders were supremely honourable about dividing food with their followers in times of dearth.[104]

The final aspect of pastoral society on the steppe to be noted is its gross political instability. Every tribal leader had to contend with the ineluctable fact that if he did not deliver considerable material success, his followers would simply melt away into the grasslands. No ties of kinship, real or fictional, clan loyalties, hereditary vassalage, territorial contiguity or tradition could prevent this. The steppe world was a treacherous one, where allegiance could never be assumed for any reason. In the absence of feud or vendetta, political alliances and coalitions were fluid and ephemeral, with a bewildering crossover of tribes, clans and even individual warriors. The only power a tribal leader had over his followers was the threat to appropriate animals and to massacre, enslave and 'adopt' women and children, but if a leader had such power, it is unlikely he would be deserted in the first place; and steppe tribesmen were brilliant at calling the bluff of blow-hards or posturers.[105]

2

Early Years

There had been powerful confederations, and even some empires, on the steppes before the thirteenth century – Scythians, Alans, Huns, Avars, Kirghiz and, especially, the Uighurs – but a historical punter, if such an animal existed, would hardly have bet on Mongolia as the birthplace of what would be by far the greatest of all. The Mongols began as an obscure tribe in one corner of Central Asia. Their foundation myth speaks of a mating between a male blue-grey wolf and a fallow deer who migrated to a high peak in the Khentei range nearer the headwaters of the Onon and Kerulen Rivers. From this union emerged a sole human male child named Batachikhan. A dozen generations later Dobun and his wife Ah-lan the Fair produced two sons. After Dobun's death she brought forth three more sons, whose father was supposed to be a mysterious being 'as yellow as the sun' who entered her tent by the light of moonbeams coming through the smoke-hole. Once inside the tent, he rubbed her belly with his hands and caused the light shining from him to enter her, then left much as he had come in, borne away by shafts of light from the smoke-hole. The five sons of Dobun – both the two he had actually begotten and the three born from a godlike source – each formed a clan once he had reached adulthood, and this was the origin of the massively complex clan system within the greater Mongol tribe.[1]

The youngest son, Bodonchar, founded the famous Borjigid clan from which the future Genghis Khan would spring. His great-grandson in turn was Qaidu, the first ruler of a fully united Mongol tribe. Again according to legend, the original Mongols were said to have been tall and bearded with light-coloured hair and blue eyes, but by systematic intermarriage they emerged as the people so well known for their short stature, black hair and black eyes.[2]

With Qaidu, who lived around AD 1050–1100, we finally emerge from the Stygian gloom of legend into the clear (well, fairly clear) light of history. The Mongols are first mentioned in texts of the Tang dynasty of China in the ninth century and during the succeeding Liao dynasty were reliable allies of the Chinese emperor. According to some accounts, they were originally forest peoples from the taiga who had migrated south. The Chinese traced their origins to the Mengwu tribe, part of the Shiwei confederation in the years of Tang dominance. By this time they had firmly established themselves in the Onon-Kerulen area of Mongolia.[3] Two things changed with the khanate (rulership) of Qaidu. First Qaidu began to intrigue with the Jurchen people of Manchuria, who would finally overthrow the Liao dynasty in the early twelfth century and establish the Jin dynasty. Then he decisively switched the Mongol economy from limited pastoralism and agriculture to full-blooded pastoralism, introducing new animals like sheep and camels; some historians claim that this was a backward step and that the Mongols had regressed from the Uighurs, who ran farms and homesteads.[4] Yet, despite his great abilities, Qaidu bequeathed to the Mongols a poisoned chalice in the shape of bitter feuding between the two principal clans in the Mongol tribe, the Borjigid and the Tayichiud (there were thirteen clans altogether but none as important as these). His eldest son Bai Shingqor Doqsin was made head of the Borjigid as the privilege of the senior sibling, but the younger (Charaqai Lingqu), formed his own lineage, the Tayichiud clan, as part of some obscure fraternal conflict. The desperate conflict between these two clans alone made it impossible for Qaidu or any of his successors to emerge as the khan of a united supertribe.[5]

The history of the turbulent twelfth century in Mongolia was dominated by relations with the new Jin empire in China. The atmosphere of chaos that emerges from the sources is partly explained by the fact that constant warfare between the Chinese and the nomads on the steppes went on at the same time as intra-steppe warfare between the five principal peoples of Mongolia – the Mongols, Merkit, Tartars, Kereit and Naiman – who were all at each other's throats, as well as the continuing feud within the Mongol tribe between the Borjigid and Tayichiud clans. Yet another factor is that the Mongol tribe did not simply consist of all the clans and sub-tribes whose native tongue was Mongolian, but that other tribes – Tartars, Naiman and

Kereit – also contained sub-tribes who were Mongols in an ethnological and linguistic sense. The only easy way to differentiate the Mongols from the other tribes is to say that they were the only purely pagan tribe – the others practising a mixture of Nestorian Christianity and shamanism.

Medieval Chinese historians made a rough-and-ready distinction between the various 'barbarians' on their frontier, dividing them into the 'civilised' or 'White' Tartars south of the Gobi and along the Great Wall, principally the Ongud; the Kereit or 'Black Tartars' who lived a non-luxurious and precarious existence on the steppes, sustaining themselves with pride at their superiority over the cowardly 'White Tartars' who had sold their birthright for a mess of Chinese pottage; and what they called the 'Wild Tartars' of southern Siberia who eked out a living from hunting and fishing.[6] The Mongols, insofar as they were identified separately, were placed by Chinese historians as being somewhere between the White and Black Tartars; only with the rise of Qaidu did the Chinese realise they were something more formidable.

The reality of the power structure in Mongolia was more complex. The most powerful nation was the Naiman, a people of Turkic origins who lived on the southern slopes of the Altai Mountains and the upper Irtysh River and were gradually spreading over the Tarbaghatai and the upper reaches of the Selenga and Orkhon Rivers. They considered themselves the heirs to the Uighur empire which had collapsed in the mid-ninth century. Politically cohesive until the early thirteenth century, they embraced a form of Nestorian Christianity mitigated by indigenous shamanism and were culturally more advanced than the tribes of northern and central Mongolia.[7] Next in importance were the Kereit, to the east of the Naiman with whom they were allied, also Nestorian Christians, who clustered around the upper reaches of the River Selenga and the Orkhon and Tula valleys.[8] The Tartars, comprising six different clans, who occupied the steppe region to the south of the Kerulen River, were the Chinese secret weapon in the twelfth century and have sometimes been called the gendarmerie of the Jin dynasty. All Chinese rulers sought to palliate the threat from their dangerous northern nomadic neighbours by a systematic policy of divide and rule, and the Tartars, until the end of the twelfth century, played the role admirably. As early as the tenth century Chinese historians identifided the Tsu-pu (almost certainly the Tartars) as the dominant tribe in eastern Mongolia. They were the traditional enemies of the Kereit and were said to have annihilated a Kereit army 40,000 strong in the early twelfth century.[9] The Tartars were particularly dangerous to the Mongols as they lived just to the south of their territories, the Mongol homeland being around the Onon and Kerulen Rivers. To the northwest of the Mongols, on the lower River Selenga south of Lake Baikal and around Lake Khovsgol, was another warlike tribe, the Merkit, fortunately for the Mongols divided into three branches each with its own ruler; the Merkit were as fragmented as the Naiman were cohesive.[10]

The first half of the twelfth century brought a significant episode in the history of the Mongols with the khanate of Qabul, Qaidu's grandson, sometimes derided for his Pantagruel-like appetite but clearly a man of great ability. In 1125 he went to China to attend the coronation of the emperor Xi Zong and was said to have shocked his hosts by his gluttony. It was probably on a subsequent visit that he committed the ultimate social gaffe, getting horribly drunk at a banquet, tweaking the emperor's beard and generally scandalising his courtiers.[11] Yet the Jin did not make the mistake of treating him as a buffoon, for his able command of steppe politics had already made him a dangerous force on the frontier. So worried were the Jin by Qabul that, having allowed him to depart in disgrace from court, they had second thoughts and sent an armed party in pursuit to bring him back and force him to sign articles of vassalage. Alerted to the pursuit, Qabul lured the Jin posse into an ambush and slaughtered them to the last man. At this the gloves came off, and from 1135 to 1147 there was bitter warfare between the Jin and the Mongols. The Jin once again tried to use the Tartars as their secret weapon but Qabul defeated them on several occasions as well as doling out a serious check to a large Jin expedition that crossed the northern frontier into Mongolia in 1137.[12] He managed to form a temporary coalition of the principal Mongol tribes, but was very far from being a supreme ruler or khan of khans; he was a temporary military leader, not a permanent ruler, the coalition was shortlived and in no sense exhibited the permanent features of supertribalism.[13]

Despite having shown so much skill in steppe politics, Qabul left behind a shirt of Nessus by choosing a Tayichiud noble as his successor, passing over all his seven sons. In Tayichiud eyes this now made them,

not the Borjigid, the senior Mongol clan. Recriminations and jealousies between the two septs were now raised to a new height. Some scholars think that this event, rather than Qaidu's misguided dividing of the realm between his sons generations earlier, was the truly significant event that weakened the Mongols and might have finished them off for all time as a serious political force.[14]

The Tayichiud chosen was Ambaghai. In 1143 he felt confident enough to take the war to the Jin and captured twenty of their forts near the Great Wall. Jin credibility was now at risk, and a large expedition was sent north in 1146. When this too failed – the Chinese could never defeat the Mongols in a pitched battle – the Jin were forced to accept a humiliating peace, in which the nomads for the first time gave terms to a Chinese emperor. The peace terms required the Jin to accept heavy reparations of sheep, cattle and grain, to abandon some of the frontier forts the Mongols perceived to be threatening and to pay a subsidy.[15] But the Jin had their revenge, and once again it was the Tartars who did the dirty work. To achieve this they were prepared to break the sacred customs of steppe hospitality. Ambaghai, thinking himself the equal as a politician of Qabul, went to the Tartar camp in the early 1150s to deliver his daughter as a bride, to seal what he thought would be a clever alliance with the Tartars. The Tartars played along but wanted none of Ambaghai's schemes. They handed him over to the Jin, who crucified him on a wooden donkey. At the moment of death he called on all Mongols to avenge him.[16] This was an atrocity that was never forgotten, and its memory would surface seventy years later with devastating consequences for the Jin.

Given the proviso that all dates in the early history of the Mongols are conjectural, we may tentatively place Ambaghai's death in 1156. He was succeeded by Qutula, a Borjigid, thus restoring that clan as the tribe's 'natural' rulers. Yet there is much that is obscure about Qutula's election. Some say that the Tayichiud broke away definitively from the Mongol confederation at this point and separated themselves physically from the Borjigid by finding themselves a new headquarters north and east of Lake Baikal.[17] Others claim that Qutula in desperation offered a fresh election in which he would stand but only the Tayichiud would vote. Yet another bizarre factor is that Qutula was Qabul's son yet had been expressly excluded from the succession when Qabul nominated Ambaghai.

Whatever the facts of his accession, the upshot was a further ratcheting of the tensions between Borjigid and Tayichiud. In Mongol lore there was a supposed difference between Nirun, 'the sons of light', and lesser tribesmen known as Durlukin – perhaps something like the distinction between the Guardians and the military class in Plato's *Republic*.[18] The problem was that both Borjigid and Tayichiud regarded themselves as Nirun and the rival clan as lesser beings. This caste difference was later strongly emphasised in the 'bible' of the Mongol empire – the *Secret History* – where only members of the Borjigid lineage are regarded as proper Mongols, with the Tayichiud as 'cousins' or poor relations, equivalent to other such minor appendages as the Besud, Oronar and Arulad clans.[19] All of this is properly Mongol esoterica, but the practical consequence of the feuding was that the Mongols were fatally weakened in the 1150s and no longer the force they were in Qabul's day. The Jin took full advantage of this, dug into their treasury to pay their gendarmes, and launched the Tartars again in a series of ferocious raids. Qutula fought thirteen pitched battles against them in this decade but could never achieve outright victory, probably through lack of numbers after the Tayichiud desertion.

He seems to have been an unlucky khan, for all the sources speak of his towering personal qualities. Said to have inherited his father's gargantuan appetite and to be immune to pain, he had powerful hands like a bear's paws and had a voice of a Boanerges worthy of history's other great bell-like declaimers, Danton and Pitt the Elder. According to one description, 'His voice resounded like thunder in the mountains . . . he could snap a man in two as you might snap an arrow. On winter nights he slept watched over by a fire built of great trees, and felt neither the sparks nor the brands that fell upon his body; at his awakening he took the burns for the stings of insects.'[20] Qutula could eat an entire sheep and drain a huge bowl of koumiss at a single sitting. Once, on the run from the Tartars, he hid among reeds, using one of them as a breathing tube while he lay submerged in water. The Tartars saw only his horse which appeared to be sinking in quicksands and concluded that the marsh had already claimed their quarry. Once they had gone, he pulled his horse out of the bog by its mane.[21] Yet for all his great qualities he lacked the numbers to deal decisively with the Tartars. After he had fought the thirteen indecisive battles, the Jin finally concluded he was sufficiently weakened to be easy pickings. They prepared a great joint expedition with the Tartars which achieved total victory over the Mongols at Lake Buir in 1161. It is unclear whether Qutula died in this battle but shortly afterwards he was no more, and the Borjigid clan was close to extinction.[22]

The next Borjigid to take up the reins was Yesugei. There is something of a mystery about Yesugei and his origins. The official version, in the *Secret History*, is that he was the third son of Bartan, Qabul's second son, and thus clearly a member of the ruling elite.[23] Yet Yesugei never ruled a Mongol confederation as Qabul, Ambaghai and Qutula had done. He had a camp on the River Onon near modern Gurvan Nuur, where he commanded a ragtag host of Borjigid, renegade Tayichiud and other clans, but he was never powerful enough to be elected khan.[24] His men were essentially guerrillas, a band formed of freelance operators and lawless 'wandering stars' who chafed against the duties and restrictions imposed by kinship and broke away from their original clans to be free spirits on the steppes. Since life as an individual in Mongolia was highly precarious, such men tended to gravitate around a charismatic leader, under pressure constantly to deliver booty.[25] As Yesugei was essentially a captain of *condottieri*, the suspicion has arisen that his inclusion in the genealogy of the Mongol ruling elite, as set out in the *Secret History*, is later propaganda, designed to enhance the glory and status of Genghis Khan. The probability is that Yesugei was the chieftain of a sub-clan, with no connection whatever with Bartan and Qabul and that he was in Mongol terms a mere *baghatur* or man of honour – the title habitually given to prominent nomads who were not of the royal line.[26]

In the 1150s Yesugei was in alliance with Qutula but he had his own goals and ambitions and for this reason often disobeyed his overlord. Yesugei's key idea was that to rise higher in the Mongol hierarchy he should ally himself with the Kereit leader Toghril (the name means 'gyrfalcon'), who needed allies since his position was under constant threat from his kinsmen. Toghril had had a difficult life. At the age of 7 he had been captured by the Merkit, enslaved, and made to grind millet with a mortar and pestle. He was rescued in a raid by his father but six years later was again enslaved, this time along with his mother, by the Tartars. This time his role in serfdom was to tend camels. Somehow he escaped, but the two incidents strongly suggest that Toghril was being 'set up' by treacherous relations.[27] Grown to adulthood, he was acclaimed as leader of the Kereit but immediately came under pressure from his two jealous brothers. Toghril decided to eliminate these pretenders to his position, but the two escaped and sought refuge with Toqto'a Beki, the principal Merkit khan. It says something about the almost routine treachery on the steppes in this era that Toqto'a immediately surrendered them to Toghril, who executed them. Toghril's uncle, disgusted by his nephew's cruelty and egomania, publicly condemned him as a murderer. The uncle, hugely popular among the Kereit because of his obvious concern for their welfare – Toghril cared only for himself – called on the people to eject this tyrant, and they responded. Toghril was lucky to escape with his life and fled south to China with just one hundred followers.[28]

This was the unprepossessing individual Yesugei chose to ally himself with, against the strong and vociferous opposition of Qutula, who rightly argued that the policy was dangerous folly. At the very time the Borjigid were struggling to fight the Tartars and the Jin and contending with opposition within Mongol ranks from the Tayichiud, it made no sense to become inveigled into the politics of the Kereit realm.[29] Yesugei was unmoved and even went through the ceremony of *anda* (roughly blood-brotherhood) with Toghril. For seven years Toghril was forced to roam the frontier lands as a minion of the Jin. Finally, when he and Yesugei were strong enough, they invaded Kereit territory and overthrew the regime there, forcing Toghril's uncle to flee west for sanctuary to the Tangut realm of Hsi-Hsia (the north-western corner of modern China).[30]

But Yesugei's foolish involvement in Kereit politics did not complete the tally of his idiocy. He displayed his complete lack of political nous by starting a feud with the Merkit too. Two issues are salient here. The Mongols practised exogamy and would travel long distances to find a suitable wife, but were not averse to stealing women, even other men's wives or betrothed, if the opportunity presented itself. Yesugei meanwhile was a notorious womaniser who already had one official wife and a harem of bedfellows. Sometime in 1159–60 he took a fancy to a fifteen-year old girl named Hoelun, who was then engaged to the Merkit leader Yehe Chiledu, Toqto'a's brother, and abducted her in circumstances not entirely clear.[31] This act of grotesque irresponsibility set off a fifty-year feud between Mongols and Merkits. Yesugei's sons would thus inherit a vendetta which was none of their making but which honour and culture compelled them to carry on.[32]

With Hoelun Yesugei begat five children, four sons and a daughter: Temujin, born in 1162 (for the date see below); Qasar, born 1164; Qaci'un, born 1166; Temuge, born 1168; and the girl Temulun, born in either 1169 or 1170.[33] Yesugei already had two children from an official wife, whose name is disputed. There are also hints in the sources that this earlier wife might have been unfaithful.[34] The two sons from the previous marriage were Begter and Belgutei. It is typical of all things connected with the early history of the Mongols that there is no agreement on Hoelun's tribal origin. The consensus view is that she was from the Buriyat tribe, one of the forest peoples, and even today the Buriyats trace their ancestry to Genghis Khan's mother. Others say that the Buriyat connection is bogus, even though there is the circumstantial touch that Genghis's wife Borte was buried in their territory. On this view she was a member of the Olqunu'ud clan of the Ongirrad tribe, situated in the most easterly part of Mongolia.[35] This would impart some rationality to Yesugei's abduction of Hoelun, since the Ongirrad were the Mongols' favourite target for intermarriage, so much so that the Mongols referred to them as the 'consort tribe'.

Temujin, the future Genghis Khan, was born in 1162. This is the only date that makes sense of the other events in the sources, though some historians, beginning with Rashid al-Din himself, have opted for 1155. At the other extreme is the eccentric view that he was born in 1167, which would require an entire recasting of all other elements in the traditional narrative.[36] Nor is there any agreement on where he was born. One suggestion is that he was born in a valley called Gurvan Nuur, while another goes for Delun Boldog in Dadal, 350 miles north-east of modern Ulan Bator, a small village in Khenti province in the middle of beautiful forests, mountains and lakes, though this hypothesis seems to resonate far more with Plato's idea that a beautiful environment produces greatness than on any documentary evidence. The commonsense view is that he was probably born somewhere on the upper reaches of the River Onon, or possibly the Orkhon region, which is rich in game; Baljun Island (actually a peninsula on the Onon) and Mount Duyiran have been mentioned.[37]

Inevitably legends grew up about his birth, including the story that he was conceived when a ray of heavenly light was beamed into his mother's womb – a story remarkably like the Virgin Birth in

Appendix 1

Mongol Religion

The religion of the Mongols was extraordinarily complex, as it comprehended a threefold view of the world, corresponding roughly to the transcendental, the mystical and the practical; one might call it a triply intersecting cosmology. At the transcendental level the Mongols believed in a Supreme Being, Koke Mongke Tengerri, who presided over the Eternal Blue Heaven. Yet even here there was ambiguity, as the Mongols never clearly differentiated between Tengerri as a personal god on one hand, and as the representation of cosmic order on the other. Were God and Heaven synonymous, with Tengerri as the proper name for the cosmos, or did he precede the Eternal Blue Heaven and create it? Philosophers would say that at this level there was an unresolved confusion between the concepts of God and Heaven. If God and Heaven were identical, that would justify the oft-repeated assertion that the Mongol religion was monotheistic, which does receive some support from the *Secret History*.[1]

Yet there is far more compelling evidence that the nomads' belief-system was polytheistic. Tengerri, as well as personifying the principles of cosmic order, existed as a personal deity who created all things, especially the sun and moon, which were sacred to him. You could pray to him to get fortune and happiness for yourself, your sons and your daughters.[2] Under him in the heavenly hierarchy there were supposed to be ninety-nine lesser gods, all with distinctive natures and attributes, with forty-four assigned to the eastern side of the world, fifty-five to the western; four more were sometimes assigned to the north (Tengerri took care of the south himself). The number ninety-nine was chosen because of the Mongols' belief in the mystical significance of the number nine, but inevitably such a neat cosmology soon became muddled with the addition of extra gods.[3]

Tengerri in Heaven was especially complemented by the goddess Itugen, an earth or fertility deity. There was a god of the hearth, named Natigai, mentioned by Marco Polo, to whom one prayed for health, wives, children and livestock. Then there was a separate sun-god, in whose honour a great festival – 'the Day of the Red Disc' – was held on the sixteenth day of the first month of summer. The constellation of the Great Bear was venerated as the god of Fate and Destiny. A fertility deity named 'the White Old Man' was also worshipped. He was supposed to be a white-clothed, white-haired old man who leaned on a dragon-headed staff. He particularly fascinated the Buddhists who later incorporated him into their own religion, to the point where there were stories about meetings between Lord Buddha and the White Old Man.[4] Then there was a fire god, who seemed to be able to answer every prayer, since one could beseech him for all of the following: blessings at birth, including long life, fame, power and riches; protection from heat, frost and all noxious qualities of wood and iron and (paradoxically) from fire; warding off illnesses; protection from wolves, thieves and cattle murrain; provision of good health for cattle, horses, camels, bulls, geldings, mares, stallions, dogs, and so on; and similar protection for slaves and their precious labour.[5] Finally, and very importantly, the Mongols believed in a version of 'guardian angels': protective deities in the form of armed horsemen known as *sulde*, whose particular task was to protect the great khans and aristocrats so that they could fulfil the destiny preordained by Tengerri.[6]

If the world of Tengerri and the lesser gods defines what we have called the transcendental element in Mongol religion, the mystical is represented most of all by animism: roughly speaking, the belief that not only animals but plants, rivers, mountains, lakes and even the wind and rain are imbued with spirits. Particularly important were the cults of natural phenomena such as mountains, trees and animals (where the wolf held pride of place with the Turks, with the Mongols it was, naturally, the horse). Since animism implied that spirits were everywhere, it followed that they had to be placated and appeased when any significant event was due to take place – birth, marriage, death, hunting, war. Mongols believed that the soul resided in blood so that if you shed blood you also emptied out the soul. This was why they never liked to shed the blood of high-ranking enemies but

found other ways to execute them, usually by strangulation with a bowstring, breaking a man's back or violently dragging the condemned around wrapped up in a carpet.[7] There were special cults of mountain tops and river springs, since the Mongols believed that water was symbolic of a higher power. Sun worship was important and, for reasons not entirely clear, the Mongols associated the sun with the South and, in paying tribute to solar power, genuflected towards the south.[8]

Quite distinctly from the gods and goddesses associated with particular phenomena, animist beliefs impelled the nomads to informal tribute to the elements, and this was performed by laymen (and women). For example, in worshipping the earth as a deity, they liked to make a household god of him out of felt. Incense offerings accompanied by prayer, perhaps led by a 'lay preacher', were the most common forms of appreciation of the winds and the mountains. The normal ritual of worship was to kneel nine times (the reliable magic number) with the head uncovered and a belt hanging round one's neck.[9]

Fire worship tended to be accompanied by more substantial offerings, such as the breastbone of a sheep covered with melted butter. In parts of Mongolia the fire offering was the exclusive preserve of women, carried out on the twenty-ninth day of the last month of the year.[10] Yet another objection to the notion of Mongol religion as simple monotheism is that, as Carpini ruefully noted, on some indices the nomads could be regarded as idolaters, since they had the custom, once an animal was killed, of offering its heart in a cup to an idol.[11] These idols could be of many kinds, whether representations of animals or humans – what anthropologists call zoomorphic or anthropomorphic images. Cult sites in the charge of laymen were often marked by a cairn of stones with a vertical pole sticking out of them. The lay preachers – sometimes carelessly referred to as 'clan shamans' (though the term causes more problems than it is worth, as we shall see) – simply conducted prayers and sacrifices without attempting the feats of the true shaman; there was no pretence that they could travel to the sky or shape-shift into animals.[12]

Animism as the mystical aspect of religion provided the bridge, so to speak, between the transcendentalism of the Mongol folk religion of the Eternal Blue Heaven and the down-to-earth functions of shamanism. There is much scholarly debate about all aspects of shamans – those figures often loosely referred to in other cultures as medicine men or witch doctors. Some say the very notion of shamanism is imprecise – a mere conflation of different elements found in very variegated and diverse cultures – and that to be exact, we should refer only to Mongol shamans, African shamans, North American varieties, and so on. Some radical empiricists go even further and say that, even within Mongolian culture, there have always been several different types of shamans *as well as* other non-shamanic magico-religious specialists.[13] In some writings there is a distinction between 'black' shamans who go into trances, assume the shape of animals and ascend into the sky, and 'white' shamans who do none of these things but, rather like Western priests, act as intermediaries between the everyday world and that of the supernatural, limiting themselves to invoking blessings for humans and livestock from the spirits and gods of the 'upper world'.[14]

These technical debates need not detain us here. As a generalisation it is clear that the function of shamans in Mongolia was to protect a man, his family, property and flocks against illness and other manifestations of evil or evil spirits; one might say that shamanism and demonology are in a co-dependent relationship.

The demons feared by the Mongols were of different kinds: sky demons, bird demons and wandering lights as well as traditional ghosts and phantoms. The 'black' shamans claimed to be especially able to deal with these, which they did by conversing with the spirits of the human departed; the idea was that it made sense to address yourself to forebears who had 'conquered' death. Immediately one can see that there was a conceptual problem about shamanism, as its devotees claimed to be dealing both with the spirits of the dead and with the spirits of nature, and in any given case it was unclear which it was. A further problem arises because there was in Mongol cosmology no distinct kingdom of the dead and no conception of an afterworld such as Hades or the Elysian Fields or Heaven and Hell. The Mongol view of the afterlife was as a continuation of that on earth, and this alerts us to another key aspect of shamanism, that it was relentlessly practical; the Mongols were always interested in religion primarily for what it could give them in this life. This is why the term 'witch doctor' expresses an essential truth; it was the role of shamans as healers and doctors rather than priests that most attracted their adherents. Part ancestor worship, part animism, part totemism, shamanism was a classic instance of the mystifying and obfuscating role of religion.[15]

Shamans occupied an important place in Mongol life; in the early days of nomadic society chieftains were themselves often shamans, and it is not surprising that they came to see themselves as the centre of the universe. Their elite position was much coveted, and for this reason evolved into a hereditary role. Their primacy and privilege they justified by the alleged dangers of their calling – danger not just from demons but because during their work the soul had to leave the body and was therefore unprotected.[16] In order to acquire power over the weather and disease and to be able to predict the future the shaman had to go into a trance, from which an early awakening was potentially lethal. Moreover, there was a complex initiation ceremony in which the shaman had to undergo tortures such as being dismembered by spirits or eaten by a wild animal before being restored to his original shape – a symbolic death and resurrection.[17]

To prepare for his professional ordeals the shaman wore a special uniform and armed himself with magical and talismanic objects; only if equipped with these, it was thought, could he gain access to the spirits of the dead. He wore a headdress of feathers and a kaftan ornamented with various metallic items and a bell. Some shamans wore clothes that made them look like an eagle, but others wore strips of leather or cloth on the kaftan to indicate the similarity to serpents; others again wore uniforms with markings simulating a tiger's stripes. In all cases the idea was to harness the power of fearsome animals. Shamans also wore an apron to which were attached a number of mirrors – usually nine (that number again!); the mirrors were supposed to frighten evil spirits, to reflect their secret thoughts and to protect the shaman from any invisible weapons the demons might hurl at them. Some Mongolian shamans wore coronets of leather and had an imitation horn on the head representing a totemic animal.[18] Other accoutrements were red headcloths, a staff and a drum. The drum and the drumstick were very important elements in the shaman's kit, as the noise was said to enable the shaman to summon spirits to help him in his work. Often, too, he would have a human helper to beat the drum for him.[19] Additionally, the shaman bore a sceptre or beating-stick, rather like the magic wand in Western fairy-tales, which was supposed to enable him to journey to a place where he would battle demons.

Thus attired, he would go into a state of trance or ecstasy. Unlike the case of Western spiritualism, where the spirits dominate the medium, in this trance the shaman was the sovereign and master.[20] Once in the trance it was time for the journey through the heavens, for only thus could illnesses and other evils be averted. Deep in his trance the shaman would journey to the sky on a magic horse, flying through the air like witches on a broom in Western folkore and superstition. Shamanism was primarily a male preserve. There were female shamans, and daughters of chiefs in particular were sometimes admitted into the 'priesthood', but in general women were discouraged and, if admitted, restricted to divination or healing, on the ground that battling demons was simply too dangerous.[21]

The complexity of Mongol religion is evident. It was clearly more of a broad syncretism of various beliefs than a homogeneous worldview, and some of the 'contradictions' are obvious. In particular a divorce between the overarching religion of the Eternal Blue Sky and the practice of shamanism is evident. Even if we could resolve the conundrum about the coexistence of spirits of the dead, demons and spirits of nature – partly reflected in the division between 'black' and 'white' shamans and that between shamans properly so-called and other maguses and prophets – there seems to be no connection between the universe of Tengerri and that in which the shamans operated. We are entitled to ask, surely, why the shamans never bend their energies towards worship of the Eternal Blue Heaven. Shamanism is sometimes said to be 'autochthonous' – that is, it springs naturally and spontaneously from the soil of Mongolia – but in that case how can we connect it with the very different principle of fire gods and fire worship which seems equally 'autochthonous' and links with the Zoroastrianism of Persia?[22] In any case, one can plausibly argue that the religion of Tengerri and the Eternal Blue Heaven is far more 'autochthonous' than shamanism, since it is very likely that the 'big sky' terrain of the steppes would naturally engender a belief in a supreme sky god.[23]

Two very different theories have been advanced for the potency of shamanism among the Mongols. One derives from the work of the great sociologist Émile Durkheim, the first to point out that in some sense religion projects the structures of human society onto the wider

cosmos. According to this view, small-scale communities such as that of the nomads imagine a spirit world close to their own where contacts are direct and face-to-face. Steep hierarchies of status and gender, on the other hand, are characteristic of 'universal' religions, and on this view the Mongols were more 'organic' in their beliefs than their neighbours. Against this other scholars argue that shamanism is the result of the impact of the wider world of sedentary societies on 'hunter-gatherer' and other primitive social organisations.[24]

What is clear is that Mongol religion was utterly different from the universal religions of their neighbours (Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Confuciansim) but that there was an unresolved conflict between the official religion of Tengerri and shamanism. As we have seen, Genghis Khan progressively jettisoned elements of shamanism in an aggressive campaign to promote the cult of Tengerri, in part because shamanism was inappropriate for a world empire. Shamanism related to the world of Temujin, the poor Mongol boy, but the empire of Genghis required a universal religion. The cosmology of sky and earth fulfilled this need for a while but, after his death, the cult of Tengerri was progressively abandoned for the more functional universal religions like Islam, Buddhism and Christianity.[25] Yet shamanism was a tough practice to dislodge, and it continued potent in Mongolia into the late fourteenth century and beyond, being especially vibrant among the Buriyat tribe, even when the rest of the empire outside Mongolia had gone over to other faiths.[26]

Appendix 2

The Fall of Qara Khitai

Yelu Dashi, founder of Qara Khitai, was perhaps the most impressive steppe leader before Genghis himself. Yelu's remarkable aplomb was evinced while still in Mongolia when he had himself declared king of the free Khitans, but in 1132 he devised a new title of gur-khan for himself and was publicly acclaimed as such by his troops.[1] Already he had proved himself an opportunist and master politician. When the ruler of the city of Balasaqun, a capital of the Qara-Khanids (in modern Kyrgyzstan), asked for his help in 1128 against rebellious Qanglis, Yelu promptly arrived with his army and seized the throne; as the Persian historian Juvaini put it, 'he ascended a throne that had cost him nothing'.[2] One immediate result was an accession of a further 16,000 Khitan warriors, who had been serving the Qara-Khanids as mercenaries. The numbers in his army grew exponentially, and in 1132–34 he conquered three more important cities or towns: Kashgar, an oasis settlement (on the three-way border between modern China, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), Khotan and Beshbaliq (both in the modern Chinese province of Xinjiang).[3] Buoyed by these successes, in 1134 he attempted an invasion of China, which ended in fiasco.

He then decided to move farther west and in 1137 arrived in the Ferghana valley (today this lies at the intersection of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), a fertile area on the northern Silk Road and at various points in history, the main artery for trade between China and Persia.[4] That same year he defeated the Qara-Khanids under their ruler Mahmud II in a pitched battle at Khujand (in modern Tajikistan). This marked a definite ascent in his career. The Qara-Khanids had once been the most powerful people in this area but, defeated by the Seljuk Turks, became their vassals and paid tribute while retaining day-to-day independence. Mahmud appealed for help to the Seljuks, who had to respond to retain credibility, especially as Kashgar, Khotan and Beshbaliq were also Seljuk vassals.[5]

It is worth emphasising what a powerful enemy Yelu had made by his conquests. At this stage the mighty Seljuks, scourge of the first two Crusades and the dominant power in western Asia since 1037, controlled an immense empire from the Hindu Kush to western Turkey and from the Aral Sea in the north to the Persian Gulf.[6] It was perhaps fortunate for Yelu that the Seljuks were already past their prime, but in 1141 few would have given the Khitans much of a chance against these Turkish masters. Nonetheless, the supremely confident Yelu went out to meet them on the battlefield of Qatwan, north of Samarkand, on 9 September 1141, even though outnumbered three to one.

Led by the Seljuk sultan himself, Ahmad Sanjar, the Seljuks soon showed they had declined seriously since their glory days in the First Crusade. Their army was cut to pieces, with massive loss of life, of which the Persian historians spared nothing in the telling. The numbers engaged were perhaps 20,000 Khitans against 60,000 Seljuks, but the chroniclers managed to produce a casualty list exceeding 100,000. Nevertheless, the defeat was serious. Although Sanjar himself was lucky to escape, his wife and family fared less well and were led into captivity.[7]

Victory made Yelu the dominant power in western Central Asia. Some scholars say the Seljuks went into a decline from which they never recovered (their empire met its final demise in 1194). Yelu now had an ever-victorious army of at least 25,000 – some say as large as 70–100,000.[8] His defeat of the Turks caused a sensation worldwide and is thought to be the origin of the Prester John legend, wherein a Christian king in the East takes the Islamic enemies of Christendom in the rear and helps to promote the cause of the Cross against the Crescent.[9]

At any rate, Qatwan marked the definite foundation of the state of Qara Khitai. The subsequent conquest of Transoxiana proceeded very quickly. Very soon Qara Khitai covered a wide stretch of territory, from the Uighur domains in the east to Transoxiana in the west and from Lake Balkhash in the north to Balkh in Afghanistan in the south.[10] Unfortunately for Yelu, he did not live to enjoy his triumph very long and died in 1143. The state he established was at its apogee

for less than two years, for after his death it immediately began on the downward slope.[11]

Nevertheless the kingdom he bequeathed to his young son Yelu Yilie (with his widow Xiao Tabuyan initially ruling as regent) was an impressive creation. The Qarluqs of Almaliq, Uighurs and Muslim Turks of Khwarezmia were all their vassals but enjoyed considerable autonomy; the Qara Khitans were content with nominal overlordship and annual tribute.[12] The economy was more diversified than the Mongols', as it encompassed pastoralism, agriculture and manufacturing. It is interesting to note the spectrum of pastoralism as one goes farther west. Whereas with the Mongols the horse was sovereign, with the Tangut horses and camels had equal value, while in Qara Khitai sheep and oxen were the most important animals (one estimate of domesticated animals says that 41 per cent were sheep, 26 per cent oxen and only 19 per cent horses).[13] The flourishing agricultural sector of Qara Khitai generated melons, grapes, peaches, plums, almonds, apples, pears, pomegranate, wheat, rice and other grains; cotton was another major product. Manufacturing and craftsmanship were well represented by ceramics, glassware, metalwork, tools, utensils, weapons, carriages, boats, jewellery, jade, lacquer, clothes, textiles, leather, weaving, paper and wine-making.[14]

But Qara Khitai was always peculiar in being China away from China, so to speak, with the Liao identity carefully preserved. Although Yelu Dashi ruled a multi-ethnic state of Chinese, Khitans, Turks and Naiman, the elite was strongly Chinese and retained their consciousness of medieval China as the defining symbol of power, wealth and status; this was the tradition they sought to perpetuate.[15] Elite Qara Khitans kept their Chinese identity and never converted to Islam, even though this was the majority religion of their subjects. In this and other areas, notably administration and officers like the later Mongol *daruqachi*, they both took over the system of the Liao empire (with Chinese titles, calendars, coins, and so on) and anticipated the empire of Genghis Khan, and scholars have predictably indulged their favourite hobby of assimilating all Genghis's innovations to earlier Khitan models.[16] There was always a determined effort to maintain all the old Chinese customs and traditional dress, against that mythical day when the Qara Khitans might return to rule China. Highly literate, they had their own script, which they used when issuing orders to officials which they sealed with an official stamp in the ancient Chinese way. They even paid their troops regular wages.[17]

Although Buddhist themselves, they had no official state religion and practised religious tolerance, with a particular partiality for Nestorian Christianity (a factor in the genesis of the Prester John legend), although, curiously, they were always regarded in the world of Islam as the unregenerate enemies of Allah. Within Qara Khitai were sizeable Buddhist and Nestorian communities, a Manichean sect and even a Jewish ghetto. Some say that the Buddhism of Qara Khitai had been diluted so as to make room for ideas like fire-worship and the bizarre ritual of sacrificing a grey ox with a white horse.[18]

A notable feature of the culture of Qara Khitai was endogamy. Marriages were tightly controlled, and the traditional marriage between the Yelu 'king' clan and the Xiao 'queen' clan continued; any form of 'marrying out' was severely discouraged. Women had a high status in Qara Khitai, and indeed two of their five gur-khans were women – the importance of empresses was another Liao tradition.[19]

Sadly for Qara Khitai, none of this rich variety addressed the deep problems with which the state was beset after the death of Yelu Dashi. His son Yilie was a minor when he succeeded in 1143 and the long period of regency by his mother Tabuyan was not politically successful. In 1163 Yilie died and was succeeded by his sister Yelu Pusuwan, whose main contribution was to send her husband out on unfocused military raids and expeditions. She finally caused scandal by falling in love with his younger brother; to avert further damage to the reputation of the state her father-in-law had them both executed in 1177.[20]

Under Yelu Zhilugu, who succeded in 1178 and was generally conceded to be a weak ruler, Qara Khitai's strength and reputation plummeted still further. There was always an unresolved tension in the state between the Buddhist elite and the Muslim majority. Whereas the Liao had been a minority elite in China but had for a long period been accepted as a legitimate regime, this never really happened in Qara Khitai where there was always 'a limited imperial domain surrounded by a vast agglomeration of vassal peoples, sedentary as well as nomadic'.[21] The vassal peoples bided their time, awaiting their chance to throw off the Liao yoke, which meant that in order to survive Qara Khitai had to be both strong and continuously successful. Yet on the contrary from the 1170s on, the weakness of central power

became more and more obvious. The ruling elite never struck back hard or decisively enough at their aggressors, thus exposing their vulnerability and encouraging other discontented nations to try their luck.[22]

Corruption by civil servants and officialdom became a major problem. The regional commissions or political commisars in the vassal territories became bywords for injustice, and this encouraged the oppressed to look outside the realm for their salvation; the *idiqut* Barchuq's joining Genghis in 1211 was only the most spectacular example of this process.[23] Eventually, the siphoning off of wealth on a huge scale by Qara Khitan officials caused a financial crisis in what should have been a prosperous economy; the nadir was reached when the state had to withdraw its proud boast and admit it could no longer pay its troops wages.[24] This led to a situation where the financial tail wagged the political dog. Where wise rulers would have been paying serious attention to the spectacular rise of the Mongols in the east, instead they spent their time raiding and plundering in the rich regions of Khorasan, Transoxiana and Khwarezmia, thus diminishing their popularity locally still further. By the time Genghis was acclaimed at the 1206 quriltai Qara Khitai was already in serious trouble.[25]

If Qara Khitai was the *Titanic*, the iceberg was the kingdom of Khwarezm, which would eventually become the empire of Khwarezmia. The first ruler of this area, later acknowledged as the first 'shah' was Qutb ad-Din Muhammad (1097–1127), who was appointed governor of the province (then in the Seljuk empire) by the Seljuk sultan and granted de facto independence in return for his loyalty. The second shah Atsiz (1127–1156) had grander ambitions and rebelled against the Seljuks but was defeated and had his independent powers trimmed. When Yelu Dashi defeated the Seljuks at Qatwan in 1141, Atsiz saw his chance and occupied the cities of Merv and Nishapur. But it turned out he had merely replaced one master with another; the Qara Khitans ordered him out and obliged him to pay tribute to them.[26]

The third shah Il-Arslan (1156–1172) was ambitious and managed to expand the boundaries of Khwarezmia into Khorasan and Transoxiana. He tried to inveigle the Seljuks into a campaign against Qara Khitai, hoping that his reward in the event of success would be Samarkand. When this plan came to nothing, Il-Arslan tried refusing tribute to Qara Khitai but was defeated in battle and died soon after.[27] His successor Tekish (the fourth shah, 1172–1200) had vaulting ambitions but these were constrained by rivalry with his brother, who broke away to rule a rival principality in Khorasan.[28] Tekish's chance came in 1193 when his brother died and he inherited Khorasan.

His rise to united power coincided with a significant development in the Islamic world. The Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad had been merely the spiritual leaders of Mohammedanism, with actual political power in the hands of the Seljuk sultans. But things changed during the reign of the caliph al-Nasir li-Din Allah (1180–1225), for he aspired to temporal power and proposed an alliance with Tekish against the Seljuks. Tekish jumped at the chance, and the combined armies defeated the Seljuks near Rayy in 1194, after which Tekish beheaded the sultan Toghrul III.[29] Al-Nasir was delighted, thinking he would now inherit the space left vacant by the Seljuks, but Tekish doublecrossed him and declared that *he* would be the new sultan. Thereafter there was always bad blood between the caliphate and the rulers of Khwarezmia. War between the caliph and Tekish seemed certain until Al-Nasir, in an act of statesmanship, agreed in 1198 to accept Tekish as ruler of Iraq, Khorasan and Turkestan.[30]

But Tekish had also introduced a problem that would bedevil his son and successor. He had built up the Turkish element in his army, but the Turks regarded themselves as an elite, above the law and subject only to the whim of the shah; they behaved badly, committed shocking atrocities including mass rape and pillage, and alienated the very population a belligerent shah would need to depend on.[31] Apart from the Turkish guard, there were few mourners when Tekish died of a peritonsillar abscess in 1200.[32]

Before his death the turbulent Tekish had introduced still another complication into the politics of the area by intriguing with the Islamic Ghurids of Afghanistan. The Ghurids, based in Bamiyan and Ghor in central Afghanistan, had been defeated by the Seljuks and their sultan Sanjar in 1152 and were then regarded as a back number, but enjoyed a spectacular revival under Muhammad of Ghor (1173–1206), who at his death ruled a realm stretching from north-eastern Iran to Bengal.[33] Muhammad's brother Ghiyath al-Din, ruler of Bamiyan, always had designs on Khorasan and was backed by his brother. In 1198 he seized Balkh, a possession of the Qara Khitans. Shah Tekish urged Qara Khitai not to take this affront lying down and warned that Ghiyath's

ambitions did not rest there. Qara Khitai sent a huge army against the Ghurids but was badly defeated. The gur-khan Yelu Zhilugu rounded furiously on Tekish, blamed him for the disaster and demanded compensation for the 12,000 Qara Khitans slain in the battle. Tekish turned back to the Ghurids to rescue him, and they agreed to do so, provided he submitted to the caliph of Baghdad and restored any Ghurid territory the Qara Khitans might seize in compensation. Agreeing to this was almost the last thing Tekish did before his death.[34]

The real winner from the ferocious clash between Qara Khitai and the Ghurids was Tekish's son Muhammad II, who succeeded in 1200. His father's mortal enemy the caliph al-Nasir warned Yelu Zhilugu that it was Muhammad who was his real adversary and suggested an alliance between Qara Khitai and the Ghurids to fight him. This proposal came to nothing, as both sides were girding themselves for another round of warfare; had al-Nasir continued with his meddling, the outcome might have been an alliance between the new shah and the Ghurids, as Muhammad always identified Qara Khitai as the real enemy he needed to vanquish if he was to found an empire. In the short term he continued to make overtures to Qara Khitai hoping to use Zhilugu for his own purposes, as the Ghurids had taken advantage of Tekish's death to seize parts of Khorasan.[35] In any case, Zhilugu rebuffed the overture from the caliph on the grounds that the shah had acted four-square and he could not simply play turncoat with a loyal ally.[36]

For two years Muhammad was at war with the Ghurids, aided greatly by Ghiyath al-Din's death in 1203 and his brother Muhammad of Ghor's preoccupation with India.[37] At first things went badly for the shah, he was defeated and had to seek assistance from Qara Khitai. Zhilugu responded well and sent a huge army across the Oxus in pursuit of the Ghurids. Muhammad and his Qara Khitan allies caught up with the Ghurids and, with the help of numerical superiority and a strong wind blowing in the enemy's faces, defeated them. Quite how decisive the victory really was is disputed, for the Ghurids managed to hang on to Balkh even after Muhammad claimed he had 'routed' them.[38]

Then Muhammad of Ghor returned from India, thirsting for revenge. First, though, he had to suppress a mutiny in his army and then a rebellion of the Khokhars, a tribe in the mountains between

Lahore and Multan. In February 1205 he was triumphant and finally returned to Lahore laden with booty. He then announced a major war to destroy Qara Khitai. Next year he moved from Lahore to Ghazni in Afghanistan and ordered his viceroy in Bamiyan to prepare pontoon bridges so that he could cross the Oxus during an invasion of Transoxiana. Suddenly, in March 1206 near Jhelum (Pakistan) he fell to an assassin's knife, murdered either by a Khokhan or one of the new cult of Assassins.[39] All plans for an invasion of Transoxiana were laid aside.

Muhammad, ever the opportunist, moved into the gap left by the death of the Ghor potentate and occupied Balkh himself.[40] Zhilugu made the ultra-diplomatic gesture of recognising the shah's suzerainty over Khorasan, but Muhammad construed statesmanship as weakness. Stung by taunts that he enjoyed an altogether too cosy relationship with an infidel, and encouraged by friendly contacts with the sultan of Samarkand, he finally decided to show his true colours and attack Qara Khitai.[41] He chose the confused local politics of Bukhara, riven by strife between oriental versions of the Montagus and Capulets, as his *casus belli*. The two sides appealed, respectively, to Zhilugu and Muhammad, and the shah, defiant and uncompromising, made it clear he would not back down.[42] He crossed the Oxus in 1207, entered Bukhara and installed his own candidate.

For a while there was inconclusive warfare between Qara Khitai and Khwarezmia. In one skirmish the shah himself was captured but showed ingenuity by disguising himself as a servant and then concocting a story that he served a great lord who would pay a large ransom for his release. After somehow gulling his captors that he would return with the money, he made his escape.[43]

By this time both sides were reeling from internal troubles. While he was fighting Zhilugu, his brother Ali-Shah and his military governor in Nishapur had both usurped the title of shah. Muhammad's return put them both to flight; the Nishapur governor and his son were killed the following year. In 1209 Muhammad executed both his rebellious brother and the Ghurid sultan, thus ending the Ghurid dynasty. By the end of 1209 he had not only restored his situation in Khorasan but added Herat to his conquests while retaining Bukhara.[44]

Zhilugu meanwhile had had to deal with fresh rebellions in Khotan and Kashgar in 1204 and was increasingly conscious of being under

threat from two directions, from the shah in the west and the Mongols in the east – for 1209 was the year when the *idiqut* of the Uighurs deserted him for Genghis.[45] He could deal militarily with the shah but not if he had to take the Mongols into consideration at the same time. In 1205 the rebellions became more serious when Arslan, khan of the Qarluqs, joined Khotan and Kashgar in revolt. Zhilugu put down the risings but once more did not treat his rebels harshly, hoping his forbearance would appease his Muslim subjects and that the virus of insurrection would not spread to other Islamic provinces. It was a forlorn hope, for the wars with the shah had given the Muslims the chance they had been looking for ever since the defeats at Khujand and Qatwan.[46]

In 1207 an even more formidable rebellion took place under the most powerful of the gur-khan's vassals, Othman of Samarkand, who allied himself with the shah. They consolidated their hold on Bukhara but Zhilugu did at least manage to hang on to Ferghana. Qara Khitai gained a respite for a whole year in 1208 when Muhammad was himself hit by an internal revolt which took the pressure off.[47] The normally feckless Zhilugu at last revealed some tenacity when negotiating with Muhammad. He told him he was prepared to allow him to have de facto control of Bukhara and Khorasan, but could not permit non-payment of tribute which by now (1210) was three years in arrears. The shah decided that the time was not yet right for an all-out war with Qara Khitai. To save face he departed on a campaign against the troublesome Cuman nomads on his northern frontier, leaving his mother Terken Qatun to behave deferentially when the Qara Khitan envoys arrived and to pay them the full tribute.[48]

In 1210 Zhilugu could still console himself that, though his borders had shrunk with the loss of Balkh and Khotan, he still controlled territory eastwards as far as the land of the Naiman and north to the Yenisey and upper Irtysh, with the River Oxus as his western limit.[49] And, as always with those imbued with Chinese culture – and both the Liao and Jin shared this characteristic – he took an odd and irrational comfort from having multiple capital cities in his realm. It was at this stage that Quqluq of the Naiman entered the scene (see above, Chapter 9).